See Much, Study Much, Suffer Much
By Yu May

The sun hung low over the spires of Castle Tara, casting long shadows across the cobblestone courtyard. Within the stone walls of the royal fencing hall, the air was thick with the scent of oiled leather and the faint tang of steel. But on this particular afternoon, the hall was not filled with the clash of blades or the shouts of dueling students. Instead, it echoed with the sharp, rhythmic crack of a spanking being meted out—and the indignant protests of a certain tomboy princess.

Princess Lyra of House Niall, her fiery auburn hair tousled and her cheeks flushed with equal parts anger and embarrassment, lay draped over the knee of her fencing instructor, the stoic and unyielding Master Kael. Lyra's boots kicked futilely in the air as Kael's calloused hand descended once more with a resounding smack upon her backside. Master Kael had unceremoniously lifted up the skirt of the Princess' tunic, and pinned it in a rumple against the small of her back, revealing the white fabric of her chemise. Unfortunately, the undergarments offered little defense against the practiced hand of the fencing master's offense.

"Unhand me, you brute!" Lyra snarled, her voice sharp enough to cut through plate armor. "Do you have any idea who I am? I'm the Crown Princess! I'll have your head for this!"

Kael, a mountain of a man with a face carved from granite and eyes like tempered steel, remained unmoved, his salt and pepper beard hiding any hint of his expression. His hand rose and fell with the precision of a master swordsman, each strike landing with unerring accuracy. "I know exactly who you are, Your Highness," he replied, his voice calm but firm. "You're a foolish student who thought it wise to practice her fencing alone, without supervision, despite my explicit orders to the contrary."

Lyra's retort was swift and biting. "Oh, spare me your lectures! I was perfectly capable of handling myself! I'm not some simpering noblewoman who needs a nursemaid to hold her hand! Yow!"

"Capable?" Kael's eyebrow arched, though his tone never wavered. Neither, for that matter, did his unrelenting hand of chastisement. "Capable of nearly skewering yourself on a practice blade, perhaps. Or do you think I didn't hear you jumping around on the tables, pretending you were fencing pirates? You're lucky you didn't break your neck."

The princess let out a yelp as another sound stroke landed, her pride stinging as much as her backside. Her cheeks flushed a deeper red at the realization that Kael had overheard her dramatic narration for her imaginary duel to the death. It was bad enough she'd lost her balance on the three-legged stool and toppled to the ground in front of him. But before Lyra could replay the entire disgraceful scene in detail, another stinging smack brought her back to the present. "You—you can't do this to me! I'm the heir to the throne!"

“And I am your instructor,” Kael shot back, his voice like iron. “And I’ll treat you no differently than any other student under my charge. Rank doesn’t excuse recklessness, Your Highness. If anything, it demands greater responsibility.”

As she felt the next sizzling spank, Lyra bit her lip. At first, Lyra had felt the blow to her pride more keenly than the blows to her bottom, but the cumulative effect of the spanking was gradually starting to demand her attention. “You…you wouldn’t do this to me, if I were a boy!”

“If you were a lad, I’d give you your hiding on the bare. Her Royal Highness can have my head served on a platter later, if it pleases ‘Papa.’ But for now, you are still in my fencing hall, and I promised His Majesty I wouldn’t go any easier on you than I would on any common squire in training.”

Lyra opened her mouth to fire back another retort, but when she felt another scorching slap, the words caught in her throat. Deep down, beneath the storm of indignation and wounded pride, a small part of her recognized the truth in his words. She had disobeyed him. She had acted like a brat. And yet, here he was, treating her not as a princess to be coddled, but as a student to be corrected. It was… refreshing, in a way.

Still, her pride wouldn’t let her admit it—not out loud, at least. Instead, she gritted her teeth and endured the subsequent series of swats in silence, her mind racing. She thought of the countless times she’d begged her father to let her train like the other students, to be treated as an equal rather than a porcelain doll. And now, here was Kael, doing exactly that—holding her to the same standard as everyone else.

As a particularly resounding clap landed, Lyra squealed, and felt tears spring to her eyes. Kael paused the punishment, perhaps sensing that his charge was willing to be more reasonable.

Finally, Lyra let out a sigh, her defiance melting into resignation. “Alright, alright! I’m sorry, Master Kael. I shouldn’t have disobeyed you. It won’t happen again.”

Kael’s hand hovered in mid-air. For the first time, a hint of warmth softened his stern features. “That’s all I needed to hear,” he said, helping her to her feet.

Lyra straightened her tunic, her cheeks still flushed but her eyes meeting his with newfound respect. “Thank you,” she muttered. “For… for not treating me like I’m made of glass.”

Kael nodded, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You’ve got the makings of a fine swordswoman, Lyra. But greatness requires discipline—and humility. Remember that.”

The princess managed a small smile, her fiery spirit tempered but not extinguished. “I will, Master Kael. I promise.”

And with that, the storm passed. Kael pointed to the sword that Lyra had dropped in her haste to hide her disobedience. “Put away your blade. Since you’re so eager, I’ll drum some proper fencing into you today, and no dancing about on the tables!”

Her bottom still smarting slightly as she bent over to retrieve her lost weapon, Lyra couldn’t resist pushing back a little. “But, don’t the Masters of Arms teach that a great swordsman must always be aware of his surroundings, and use them to his advantage?”

Kael groaned as he pulled two dull, tipped practice swords from the wall and tossed one to Lyra. “Toppling off the three-legged stool is hardly what I’d call fancy footwork.”

Lyra caught the blade, beaming. As they made their way to the narrow rectangle that represented the piste, drawn in white chalk against the red stone, Lyra listened eagerly to Kael’s blunt style of lecturing. “Foundations first. Once you have the feel for the blade in your hand, we will move on to…”

Hoping to take advantage of Kael’s distraction, Lyra lunged forward, aiming to draw “first blood” with the blunted blade. But Kael seemed to vanish into thin air as he spun away, before landing the flat of his blade across Kael’s already sore backside.

Lyra let out a little “Yip!” as she hopped forward, shielding her behind. “No fair! You said…”

But before she could finish her complaint, Lyra remembered to twist around to keep her eye on her opponent and keep her guard up.

Kael was standing precisely along the chalk line that represented the narrow boundaries, his sword at the ready. He hadn’t put a toe out of line. “I was going to say, once you have the feel for the blade in your hand, we will move on to footwork. But on second thought, that thrust was excellent. The next step…is to mind your surroundings.”

Deliberately, Kael brushed his front foot across the chalk line to erase it, then lightly skipped outside of the boundaries. With a single flick of his wrist, Kael brought the tip of his blade against Lyra’s sword, which she recognized as an engagement, a signal that the bout had begun. Instinctively, Lyra retreated back into a defensive stance, only to feel her ankle knock against the very same three-legged stool that had been the cause of her downfall. Used to the straightforward back and forth of the narrowly defined piste, Lyra felt the world spinning around her, before Kael’s thrust forced her to parry, and try to counter with an offensive strike.

Lyra’s attempted riposte failed to land, but it forced Kael to halt his attack. But even as he retreated, Kael answered her strike with a graceful swing that batted aside Lyra’s blade to throw her off balance, followed by his own counter strike.

Before Lyra could think she was forced to kick the stool away as she spun into position to keep him at bay.

And then, the surrounding room, which had seemingly been swimming around her, seemed to lock into place. As Lyra successfully parried, then retreated, she panted for air.

As he leapt up onto the table, Kael's craggy face cracked into a boyish smile, which not even his mustache could disguise. "Engarde, Your Highness."

With a single, controlled breath, Lyra flashed her sword to engage Kael's and her world changed forever. She realized that the entire fencing studio had become her world, and the entire world had become a fencing ground.

The End